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Casey at the Bat

When it comes to dealing with Congress, CIA Director William Casey plays a cloak-and-dagger version of "Twenty Questions"—giving even the members of the authorized oversight committees only the most limited responses to those questions they already know enough to ask. Or, as one Republican legislator said: "Casey wouldn't tell you if your coat was on fire—unless you asked him." That grudging attitude, combined with the intelligence chief's way of mumbling his answers, made him few friends on Capitol Hill over the last three years, but last week's uproar over the mining of Nicaraguan ports finally brought relations between Congress and Casey to the breaking point—threatening his usefulness on the Hill, undermining support for the not-so-secret war in Nicaragua and endangering the larger U.S. strategy in Central America.

Past leaders of the CIA, such as Director Stansfield Turner and Deputy Director Bobby Inman, have recognized the political value of bringing Congress into their plans—in essence making them coconspirators. But even under fire last week, for allegedly failing to tell Congress about U.S. involvement with the mining, Casey was less than forthcoming. "I do not volunteer information," one participant in a closed-door briefing recalled him saying. "If you ask me the right questions I will respond." The legislators were understandably furious. "It was disastrous," said Tennessee's Democratic Sen. Jim Sasser. Said one Republican senator: "He was arrogant, confused, unknowing [and did] a miserable job of explaining this problem."

Obfuscation: Casey is disgusted with congressional intrusion on the president's ability to conduct foreign policy. He does not believe that current oversight legislation requires the CIA to report every new tactic (such as the mining of harbors under U.S. direction) in a previously approved covert operation (like the contra war in Nicaragua generally). And a reconstruction of the briefings he did conduct shows—at the very least—the oversight system's vulnerability to obfuscation and confusion. The mining began last December and the contras were claiming credit by January. Members of the House Intelligence Committee were briefed on the operation at the end of that month, but the extent of U.S. involvement required—U.S. advisers and technical experts operating on a CIA "mother ship" offshore—was not mentioned by Casey nor asked about. Members of the committee first learned about that in a mid-March briefing by Casey, and then only under persistent questioning from Democrats Wyche Fowler of Georgia and Norman Mineta of California.

Casey first said the mining was being done by "Latinos," according to a committee source. He was asked repeatedly who was directing the operation, picking the targets. "We are," Casey finally said. "We were stunned at what we had heard," said one committee Democrat. "We had been informed only because we had inquired . . . not because they thought it was anything they should have volunteered." Worse, there was little they could do with the classified information. "Once you know about it, who the hell can you tell?" griped another committee member.

The Senate Intelligence Committee had been given even less to work with, although the panel and its chairman, Arizona's Barry Goldwater, have often supported the CIA. Casey made only



Memo Ruiz—Picture Group

U.S. trainers in Honduras: Should Congress know everything?

single-sentence references to the mining in two March presentations to that panel, and none of the senators followed up as thoroughly as their House counterparts. Vermont Democrat Patrick Leahy learned more by missing a scheduled briefing and getting the story later from "second tier" CIA officials. Leahy says he assumed that his colleagues on the panel had learned as much, but there was little discussion of the matter among them; New York Democrat Daniel Patrick Moynihan felt so "betrayed" by inadequate briefings that he told colleagues he would resign as vice chairman of the intelligence committee.

Open Secret: If the CIA's congressional watchdogs really didn't know more about the mining than they were willing to admit in last week's uproar, they certainly had reason to be suspicious and demand more information—and Leahy says members of the oversight committees must immerse themselves more deeply in the process. But any covert operation that requires "hands on" involvement of U.S. personnel seems important enough for the CIA to point out to the intelligence committees. Indeed, some congressmen say they may insist on amended oversight legislation requiring more complete reporting

by the CIA before they approve even part of the \$21 million Reagan wants for the open-secret war in Nicaragua.

As for Bill Casey, his old pal the president remains firmly behind him, but Congress is likely to be more hostile than ever. Even conservative veterans of the intelligence community—pleased by Casey's ability to pump up the CIA budget—are becoming upset over damage done to the agency's credibility by ham-handed covert action and running battles with Congress. After a luncheon attended by several hundred former intelligence officers at Bolling Air Force Base last week, one former senior official reported: "If you had taken a vote there on whether Casey should resign . . . the results would have been 'Godspeed'."

DAVID M. ALPERN with
GLORIA BORGER, JOHN J. LINDSAY and
NICHOLAS M. HORROCK in Washington



Wally McNamee—Newsweek

The director: 'I do not volunteer'